

The Challenge

Jane Feather

WE'VE BEEN ON our own since Mark was nine and his dad left. Ten years ago, 2002. Bruce was in the army when I met him. Mark has the picture of him in uniform face down in his top drawer. I was left with the house – which was mine in any case from Mum – but that was it. No maintenance, nothing. Last we heard he was in Wakefield, running a pub. Good luck to him.

'I bet it was the uniform,' Mark said. We were watching an old DVD, *An Officer and a Gentleman* – though his dad was neither of those things. This time last year Mark and me weren't getting on so well either. It had been two years since he'd chucked in school and apart from scraps of work – a stint in Morrison's – he'd showed no real sign of wanting to do anything.

I kept telling him, it's not that I thought he should move out, it's just he had to take some responsibility. He couldn't slouch about the house all day, could he? I'd come home after work and he'd not have moved from that couch, crumbs, crisp packets, buckled-up cans everywhere.

'Smells like a rabbit hutch in here,' I'd say, opening the curtains, even if it was already dark, just to get some circulation.

I missed him, course I did, when he went off for his training. But I was dead proud the day of his passing-out parade. 'My God,' I said to him, when we met up afterwards for drinks, 'what have they done to you?' It was like they'd put him in one end of a machine, rubbed and scrubbed and polished him up. 'I hardly recognise you,' I said. 'Come here!'

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He smelled how my dad used to smell, spick and span of coal tar soap.

‘How many years have I been trying to get you to cut your hair?’ I said, poking him. ‘Look at you!’ He was like the little boy in his school photograph again. ‘I forgot you had ears,’ I said.

It’s given him a sense of direction, definitely. The way he holds himself now. Confident. Like he’s found his backbone. Makes me well up to think of the change there’s been in him.

8 til 3.30, Windmill Road. And I’ve been there – hard to believe it – eleven years; seen half a dozen classes right through from reception into year six, thinking they’re big boys now with their hair gel and their mobile phones. There’s a couple of them every year will always remind me of Mark, just that age. ‘Miss,’ they call me, just like they call the teachers, some of them on their tiptoes, holding onto the ledge. ‘Miss, can I ‘ave a dinner ticket?’

It was one of the teaching assistants told me about the trials: Emma Hatfield – she was in Mark’s year at Cheyney. Her mum’s a cleaner at the Warneford and she said they were desperate for volunteers, did it herself last year and it paid for the holiday.

‘A round of drinks,’ she says, ‘I’m not joking, it’s like half a day’s work.’

‘You get paid?’ I asked.

She nodded, enthusiastic. ‘You could, like, go on your lunch break,’ she said, ‘if you’re not frightened of needles, which I am, but mum isn’t.’

‘I’m not mad about them,’ I said.

‘Mum says you don’t have to look.’

Holiday: that word stuck.

– ‘Mum?’

‘Mark? Is that you?’

– ‘Who did you think it was? Howayadoing?’

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‘What about you? How are you?’

– ‘It’s boiling out here, Mum. You wouldn’t believe it. Stick your head in the oven one day. That’s what it’s like.’

‘How hot is it?’

– ‘Roasting. Ten times as hot as it gets at home. I swear, I’m sweating like a pig.’

‘You drinking lots, aren’t you? You must drink, it’s good for you.’

– ‘Yes, Mum, I’m sick of it. You sweat it off in a minute... It’s doing my head in.’

‘You all right?’ I had to control my voice.

– ‘Yeah, surviving. Look, Mum, I gotta be quick. Can you send Q-tips? And toothpaste – not that shit stuff?’

‘Course I can.’

– ‘And razors?’

‘Hang on, love. Let me write it down.’

Hearing his voice churned me up. It was ever so close, hard to think he was half-way across the world.

‘Is it sandy out there?’ I asked him.

– ‘We’re in the bloody desert Mum. Yes.’

It was an effort to believe. It reminded me of my brother and me, out the back with soup tins and string. ‘Over and out,’ he would shout and he’d make me say it loudly back, ‘*Roger*. Over and out.’

I imagined Mark in some sort of wooden booth, boxed in.

‘You’re keeping your head down, aren’t you?’ I asked.

– ‘Yes Mum.’

‘You be careful, won’t you – sweetheart?’

– ‘Mum. I’m gonna have to go now. Things to do.’

‘Look after yourself, Marky. You will, won’t you?’

– ‘Love you too.’

– Clunk: so abrupt when it ends, the sound of a fat fly, bang into my ear.

Every now and then you see something on the news. Course

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it's there all the time in the background, but then, with no warning, it rears like a monster, ready to upset everything.

'If you hear it first on the radio or on the TV,' the Major had told us, 'you can rest assured it will *not* be your son or daughter.'

So then you'd have this terrible sense of relief. Terrible, because you'd be thinking: *How can I be relieved?* Some other mother in her black suit, who's cried her eyes out. I would home in on that mother's face – or the girlfriend's or the wife's – and know it could just as easily be mine.

And yet it wasn't, I'd tell myself. Thank God, I'd think. It isn't me.

Funnily enough 'challenge' was a word Mark used. 'I need a challenge,' he said, as if he had to persuade me. 'I'm sick of being bored.'

I was pleased for him. I thought he'd reached a turning point; I thought, *All will be well*. I knew in my bones that he'd come round, if I could only let him be and didn't nag. And he'd proved me right. But as soon as he went out to **Afghan**, from the morning he left, I wasn't able to sit still. I felt useless.

He'd been out there a month or so when Emma's mum sent her into school with a flyer. *If you are aged 18 to 50 and in good health, get in touch...* Why not? I was the right side of fifty, not quite on the scrapheap yet. And then, when I went along to the Churchill for that first meeting, and they'd sat us down with the pros and cons and used the very same word – 'The *challenge* involves a day in London,' they'd said – it seemed meant. Not just the money, but a challenge too – that's exactly what I needed. What's more, hearing the lady talk – a million dying from it every year, babies most of them – I began to feel that in some small way I would be doing my bit.

I give permission that my medical notes and data...

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*I agree investigators may contact my nominated next of kin if I fail to attend **for a follow up** after the challenge.*

I understand that should I fail to return for review as stated above, I may become seriously ill and die.

I agree to take part in this study.

Signature of Volunteer:

As I finished ticking the boxes and signed my name, it gave me a lift to think that Mark must have done something similar. MARK BRADLEY. He always writes his name in block letters.

It was during those five weeks' leave, before he went off that he told me he'd got to write his 'death letters'. I admit, it took the wind out of my sails.

'What a name for it!' I said. 'They don't mince their words.'

'Who should I write to? I hate writing,' was all he said. He'd chewed the top of that biro until there was a hole in it.

As far as I was aware, he'd never had a proper **girlfriend**. The closest he'd come was Joanne.

'Jo,' he'd said, pushing her through to the kitchen to meet me – 'Mum.'

It was the first time he'd ever introduced anyone like that. She had a long flop of dark hair that hung across her face. I caught Mark looking as if he'd brought me home a present. 'Lovely,' I'd said.

'Make a list,' I said to him now.

'A list?' he asked. 'How am I gonna make a list?'

'Joanne?' I suggested, testing him, though my stomach was turning over. And then, 'I wish you wouldn't do that – I hate chewed pens!'

There were going to be six of us in our group, the 'control' group, which meant we'd have the challenge but not **the new vaccine they were testing**. So, although we wouldn't earn quite so much as the others, it didn't involve as many

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visits to the hospital – fewer needles and bloods. The day before London, we had to go in for a final check-up, five tablespoons of blood, which is not pleasant. They had to test that the females of us weren't pregnant – which I couldn't help tell them, in my case, would be a miracle.

'Don't wash in the morning,' we were told. 'No soap, no perfume or aftershave.' It puts the mosquitoes off.

'The great unwashed!' the big fireman said, clapping his hands as we grouped together. We'd been told to gather by the vending machine outside M&S on platform [one](#). For the 8.06. There must have been nearly twenty of us in the end, with the medics – a bit of a party atmosphere. I noticed then how bubbly she was, the small girl in our group, and how she seemed to know everyone already.

On the train, I was relieved to be sitting next to a man who had nothing whatsoever to do with the trial, a businessman. He had his laptop plugged in. Bubbly girl and the fireman were behind us. I shut my eyes.

'Graham,' I heard him tell her and the rustle of his anorak.

'What made you do it?' she asked.

'Couple of lads at the station came along last year,' he said. 'I want an iPhone.'

'I work at the Institute,' she told him. 'Research.'

'Oh? What does that involve, then?'

'TB at the moment. We're testing mice. I want to go out to Africa.'

'Wow.'

'If they can find vaccines – for things like TB, Malaria – it would be like all the aid anyone's ever given rolled into one.'

'Wow. I never would have known that. Really?'

'People don't. It's like a knee-jerk reaction to send the money out there – half the time it doesn't get into the right hands. But pictures from Africa I suppose are far more sexy

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than pictures of men in white coats.'

Sexy. She was bold. I felt myself blush for him; I heard him unzip his coat and try to slip himself out of it.

'It's a vicious circle: poverty, disease... But if you can break the circle,' she went on, 'then people start to get educated, to look out for themselves – things like that.'

He grunted, folding and pressing the anorak into his lap.

'Sorry,' she said. 'I sound like a lecture.'

'No, not at all. It's interesting. You don't think about it, do you?' Then he said, lowering his voice so that I had to keep very still to pick it up, 'Bit weird, that 'Malaria Man' stuff – I looked it up after, did you?'

'All of us knew,' she said. 'It got in the papers.'

They'd mentioned the man in our first session as a warning to us: he'd run off at the crucial point without telling anyone and without treatment.

What would we feel about being tagged? they'd asked. *Would it put us off?*

Yes, we all agreed, it would. It would make us feel like criminals. But I'm sure I wasn't the only one who felt pleased to be consulted, pleased to be able to say 'no' and have attention paid to it. That was the unexpected part: being made to feel special.

'We need to emphasise how serious it is that you keep in touch,' the doctor had said. 'We've had hundreds of volunteers and never had a serious problem. But if you don't come in, there's nothing we can do. In the end – in that particular case – we had no option but to call in the police. Not that he was a danger to anyone else, but if you contract the disease and don't receive treatment then, yes, there is the possibility of fatality.'

'He must have known the cops were onto him,' Graham said from behind me.

'And he was a nurse,' the girl said. 'It was weird. He knew the risk.'

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‘It’s unbelievable. You wouldn’t think a nurse would behave like that, would you?’

Imperial College is in the west of London, but it could have been anywhere – we didn’t have a chance to look around. Soon as we arrived, we were whisked from the reception and taken upstairs, shown straight into an open-plan office. There were sandwiches out on the tables already, and jugs of orange.

‘Tuck in,’ someone said, because we all held back.

They had sprigs of parsley and brown bread – *healthy* I was thinking, though the crusts had been cut off. I was hot already. Hot from the journey and hot from being in a strange building. I worried suddenly if I was the only one who’d taken them at their word and not put on deodorant. I grabbed a couple of egg sandwiches and took myself off to one end of an empty table. The girl and the fireman were queued up. It was almost comical, seeing them next to each other, Little and Large. She was the sort of girl who’d always have been popular – popular since she was born. She had lovely hair, cut perfectly straight along her neck. A doll-like figure: it made you want to pick her up, look after her.

‘Helen,’ she said, smiling as she came over. She nodded at the chair next to mine, ‘Can I join you? By the way, I know plenty of people who’ve done this before,’ she said, sorting herself out – her coat, her plate of food. ‘They’ve all been fine – promise.’

I tried to smile, to stop looking worried. ‘Have you?’ I asked.

‘Not this one. I’ve done psych trials, drug trials – but not this.’

‘Do you work at the hospital?’

‘The Institute,’ she said. ‘I like the trials – you get to meet people.’ She took a small bite, swallowed it down. ‘And,’ she said, ‘I get to find out what it’s like on the other side – being a volunteer. I’m hoping I’ll be running trials of

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my own one day,' putting the palm of her hand to her head, 'touch wood.'

The fireman came and hovered over us.

'Graham,' Helen said, and, turning to me, 'I'm sorry, I don't even know your name?'

'Maureen,' I said. 'Mo.' The orange juice had made my teeth sticky. 'Pleased to meet you,' I said.

The 'challenge suite' was a small room off a laboratory and, after lunch they told us, we'd be led in there one by one.

'Take a seat,' the nurse said when my turn came, following me in. There were two chairs either side of a small square table and a young man in a doctor's coat standing in the corner, wearing the same blue rubber gloves as the nurse.

'It won't hurt,' she said as if she too thought I was a mouse.

I sat down as she waited by the window through to the laboratory – what in our house was called 'the hatch' and opened from the kitchen to the lounge. It was the thing about the new house my mother had been most proud of. 'Use the hatch,' she'd shout, 'that's what it's for.'

In a moment the glass shutter was slid to one side and a sleeve and a blue hand appeared holding a small plastic cup. The nurse was ready; she took it, holding it at arm's length like it was full to the brim, set it on the table. There was a gauzy material across the top, kept in place with a thin rubber band.

'There's five of them in here,' she said, peering over the top and tapping the sides of the cup very gently. I found myself straining to hear, expecting a hum – the sort of hum we get round us at the end of the summer, loud enough to make me turn the light on and sit up in bed with a rolled-up magazine. But I couldn't hear a thing. Perhaps they didn't hum, the ones that had malaria?

'Slip your jacket off,' she said. As soon as I did, I was

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aware of the heat rising from my top, musty-smelling like an old radiator.

‘Roll up your sleeve, if you would,’ she said. ‘I’m going to turn over the pot and place it on your arm. I doubt you’ll feel a thing. Five to ten minutes, we’ll give it, all right? If you could just rest your arm on the table, make yourself comfortable? Relax.’

I did as she asked, laid out my arm. She tipped the cup carefully and set it against the skin, pressed as if it were a glass to a wall and she was going to listen in.

‘We’ll put a cloth over; they like the dark, that’s when they feed – it’ll encourage them. There,’ she said, ‘that’s right,’ as the young man brought forward a dark duster-cloth, laid it over my arm and knelt down to straighten it, adjust the corners. Although it’s been years since I’ve been to church, him kneeling and us sitting there in silence reminded me of it – the cloth over the sweet wine.

Perhaps I expected a pinprick or a sting? The silence made me ten times more nervous.

‘You never notice you’ve been bitten, do you?’ I said. ‘Not until afterwards and it begins to itch?’

‘That’s right. You may not feel a thing,’ the nurse said, keeping an eye on her upturned watch.

And then it began to tickle. As if a feather were trapped in there, floating just above the skin.

‘It’s tickling,’ I said, making an effort to keep still.

‘Good,’ she said. ‘Let’s hope they’re biting!’

I looked it up: *Falciparum malaria*. It was like the doodles we used to make from the insides of felt tips – prints of little circles, a pretty mauve colour. I was off work in any case because of half term. We had to report in at the Churchill the following Tuesday, six days later – seven days was the earliest incubation, they told us. After that, it would be twice a day for check-ups, bloods, so that the doctors could treat us as soon as they saw the slightest sign.

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It would have been quite possible for me to fit the follow-ups around my job, but I'd already decided that I'd take that next week off as well. I was owed the holiday.

The morning after the challenge – still half term – I gave myself ten minutes extra in bed. I was a bit tired, nothing else. I switched on the bedside lamp and had a look at my arm: the swelling from the night before had gone down to five distinct peaks. 'Perfect,' the doctor had said, examining me and patting my arm, 'Ready to go.'

As soon as I saw the bites I wanted to itch, but I resisted. We'd been given a tube of antihistamine, which I reached for, squeezing the cream directly onto the spots. I decided it would be best if I got up and was busy. After breakfast, I'd do the kitchen cupboards, knowing it would take me all day.

I was standing on a chair in the kitchen when the doorbell rang. It's hard to remember now if I had an inkling, because I've been over it so many times, enough to convince myself that I had. Who rings at that time, mid-morning? The postman? I hadn't ordered anything recently, not that I could think of. The electric?

There's frosted glass the length of the door frame. I could see it wasn't a child, and by the broad shape, the height, it was probably a man, a man wearing a cap, some sort of uniform.

Even as I knew exactly who it was, I squashed the thought. It was the Salvation Army, I told myself, collecting for jumble; a traffic warden lost in a back street. My tongue was like a rag. I took hold of the catch and pulled open the door. The man had half turned and he revolved back smartly on his heel, reached up for his cap and drew it off, held it pressed under his elbow.

'Mrs Bradley?'

Mark had a computer, a great big lumpy thing that took up half his bedroom. Although we've got one in the school

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office, it was Mark who, four or five years ago, first showed me how to get online. We used the telephone extension on the landing, the sound it made, chirping like a bird; he'd shown me what to look for at the top of the screen, the bar that filled up like a syringe.

Since then, all my clothes I buy online, eBay mostly. I like to get a parcel in the post; I like the notes that people sometimes put in. *Hope you enjoy wearing this as much as I did! Take Care J.* And lately, because of the money, I was looking up holidays for us. Mark was due back before Christmas and it would be a surprise.

It was years since we'd been away together. By the time he was a teenager Mark had lost interest. He must have been seven or eight the last time we went as a family, all three of us. We'd hired a caravan at Weston. Two bedrooms it had, plus a shower and a loo. Mark loved it. We bought him one of those little surf boards with a shark on. Half the time his dad was like a little kid too, took it into his head that they were going to build a fortress, a proper castle, not a poxy thing from a bucket. I remember how clear and blue and hot it was that day, me stretched out in the one deckchair. They'd got a tower from a piece of driftwood, a fence most of the way round from razor shells. Ingenious, I said. It wasn't until we got back to the caravan that I realised how burned I'd got: I'd lashed the cream on Mark but not bothered with myself, wanting, I suppose, to get brown. The sun was like acid, worst along the line of the swimming costume; I could see it in the mirror, the skin in blisters, peeling off. I lay on my front along the thin length of the couch and groaned. It was Mark with his soft hands who helped to pat the Nivea on my back.

'Gently,' I said, putting my head to one side. 'Be gentle.' And he was: so soft I almost cried.

'Mrs Bradley?' the Major said.

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If I had denied it then and there, it would have been the truth. As if what truly revolted me was the sound of my own name.

‘May I come in?’ he asked.

As soon as his shiny cherry-black shoe stepped over that threshold, I knew.

He spoke as if he had a check-list, about arrangements and how the army’d sort it all out if I wanted them to, to which I nodded, because then it wasn’t happening – it wasn’t my problem or my mistake.

‘It’ll go out on the news,’ the Major explained. ‘Be prepared for that. In a day or two. We can give them his passing-out photo, if you’d like, unless there’s one you prefer?’

If I didn’t answer him; if I could just manage to say nothing...

‘There’s no need for you to say or do anything at this moment in time,’ he went on. ‘You’ll need a while to let it sink in. But I’m going to leave you with the number of a very nice lady, a counsellor, who’ll talk it all through with you, when you’re ready. We’d strongly advise you to speak to her.’

‘Next of kin’ is what I was to Mark and ‘next of kin’ was exactly how I put him on the form at the hospital: with our home address, his mobile number (which, even as I wrote it down, I knew – out there – couldn’t work).

It was the second time recently I’d thought about God. Because it felt as if someone were watching me, someone high up. Someone who knew there was a design to it. Either that, or I’d brought it all on myself. When the Major left he took everything with him, ransacked the house, raped and pillaged. All without lifting a finger. I sat on the couch in the thick air and undid myself from everything I had ever learned that kept me on the straight and narrow. Like a great harness, I took it off.

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Everything's online nowadays or easy enough to find. I put in 'caravan site' and 'Weston-Super-Mare'. Three or four down the list, there it was, the exact, same place: Sea View Caravan Park. Est. 1978. A phone number.

'I've been before,' I told the lady who answered, 'about ten years ago.'

'Oh?' she replied. 'And when were you thinking?'

'Something small,' I said, 'Friday, if you've anything free.'

'This week?' she said, taken aback. 'Let me check. Bear with me.' I couldn't help thinking she took her time on purpose. 'You're in luck,' she said. 'We've a four-berth, free at 4 o'clock Saturday. Do you want it for the week?'

'See how it goes,' I said.

We agreed, as it was short notice, I'd pay when I arrived, at the office. I'm not stupid. They can trace things on computers, on credit cards. And I'd given her my maiden name, Harris. Up in Mark's room, I was proud of myself, covering my tracks, looking up B&B's in Brighton, Weymouth, Bognor Regis, anywhere I could think of, onto the machine. I even looked up Wakefield, and 'pub', and 'Bradley' (not for the first time, either). It would be natural, they might think, that I'd want to track his father down: 'Your son, if you're interested, he's been blown sky high.'

The bed in his room was stripped. Mark had taken the Sponge-Bob duvet with him. I lay on the shiny mattress, my head, where his head would have been, where, at eye level, there were cut-outs from magazines, Sylvester Stallone, Bruce Willis, Britt Ekland – a gun tucked into her bikini.

'Do you know how old she is now?' I'd once asked him. 'Way older than me, way more wrinkly.'

There were greasy spots of blue-tac all over the walls I'd once painted, from where he'd pulled a lot of stuff down. The calendar had disappeared from the back of the door, pictures I'd turned a blind eye to – there are certain things a

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mum doesn't dwell on. He'd cleared up a few months before he went away, on account of his meeting Joanne I assumed, which, though nothing appeared to have come of it, made me think at least he thought about such things.

I have never done anything wrong or anything out of the ordinary in my life. Not if you don't count the divorce. I have always done exactly what I've been told. I was perfectly well behaved at school, got through my exams, didn't give my parents any kind of grief. Apart from when Mark was little, I've worked, earned my own way. If it had been up to me, I'd have had more kids, but Bruce was never keen. Leave it a year or two he kept saying until he left himself and it was too late. There's nothing to say that, by now, Mark doesn't have a dozen little brothers or sisters out there. He's asked me that directly once or twice. 'Who's to say?' I told him; I'm not going to lie.

'Wanker,' Mark said.

'Don't say that,' I said. 'He's your dad. Nothing's going to change that.'

'I didn't choose him, did I?'

'None of us has a choice,' I said.

'Fat lot of good he does,' Mark said.

We were able to agree on that.

But there was no time for this. The next day, I acted like I was on a mission. I would do it all in cash; took out £400 from the big post office in town, the most I'd ever taken out. 'It's for a deposit,' I said, though I had no reason to explain.

On Saturday morning I set off with my small red case, took the bus as far as Carfax then walked out towards the station. I was like a ghost – as if I'd been away for years and come back at some dim point in the future. There was a load of students on the pavements with their bicycles. The way they spoke: *Yaaaah*, like cowboys. I was invisible to them, same as the other ghost whose eye I caught in the windows of the cafes and restaurants, all the way down George Street.

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‘Weston-Super-Mare,’ I said through the holes in the ticket office. ‘Single, please.’

It was only a couple of hours away on the train, change at Didcot, Bristol Parkway. The minicab – another fifteen minutes – dropped me off at the entrance to the site and, by that time, I was so fingers and thumbs that I managed to give him a £5 tip.

The place was drabber than I remembered, but it might have been the weather, the season. The path was churned up and muddy all the way to the green prefab.

‘I’m early,’ I said, pushing the door. ‘Sorry.’

The lady behind the desk was plump and middle-aged.

‘Mrs Harris? Not to worry,’ she said, as we sorted out the money. ‘The other people left nice and early. I’ll show you down.’

‘It’s quiet,’ I said, as we walked along a line of caravans and awnings.

‘You’ve come at the right time, if that’s what you’re after,’ she said.

I wasn’t used to returning anywhere that wasn’t home; it was like a dream. I followed the lady, lifting the wheels of my case from the ground. There was sand on the path, dirty, trodden in. I wondered if it was the same sand as the sand in the desert? The sand Mark complained of so bitterly. ‘It gets bloody everywhere,’ he said. ‘You wouldn’t believe it.’

‘Path to the beach,’ the lady said, nodding towards a bin for dog dirt. ‘Here we are.’ She unlocked the door and put her nose inside. ‘You should find everything in there you need: bed’s made up. Anything else, just ask. 9.30 to 4, someone’s in the office. We’ve bread and milk in there, tins, the basics.’

‘Thanks again,’ I said as she handed me the key, shutting myself in as soon as she turned away. I had a headache, which I put down to the excitement, the adrenalin. I wasn’t used to journeys. I ran the tap until the

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water cleared, filled a glass and took a sip. It tasted of perfume. The two stainless rings of a hob. Baked beans, that's what I remember, and corned beef hash, which was Bruce's favourite – he used to get it on exercise. I opened the cupboard next to the sink. There was a set of three saucepans, an enamel frying pan. I'd polished them before we left last time with a wire scourer until they shone because I didn't want anyone thinking I didn't do the same at home.

On the counter there was a tray with a teapot, a cup and saucer set out, a jar with complimentary tea-bags. I put the kettle on, then went through and sat down on the corner couch. On a ledge opposite, there was a portable TV. I went over and pulled out the little plug: I had half an idea that I might be traced.

It was definitely smaller than the caravan we were in last time. There were twin doors at the kitchen end, with the toilet and the shower and just the one tiny bedroom off the lounge. I took my case through and sat on the edge of the bed. The curtains were shut but by the light of the open door I unpacked: wash-bag, a couple of Mark's old t-shirts, knickers, and the thick long-sleeved nightdress I'd had from Mum – a 'passion-killer', according to Bruce – which I liked to wear when it got cold. At the bottom of the bag, there was the pad of lined paper with the long brown envelope I'd tucked inside. MRS BRADLEY, 6 BAKER CLOSE, HEADINGTON, OX3. The kettle started a shrill whistle.

I got up to make tea, taking my time, letting it brew. Into the cup I emptied the two tiny pots of UHT. When it was done, like an egg and spoon race, I carried the full cup through on its saucer, clicked on the lamp.

Dear Mum

I'm hoping you dont get to read this because if you do then its curtains for me! You know I'm no good at writing. What would I want to say to you – that's what the padrey said for us to write.

You have always been there 4 me. Anything that is good

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in me comes from you. Not the bad stuff, the good. Your doing.

If I think about dyeing I think anyway you might get run over by a bus or blown up even on a bus or be born with a dodgy heart or something – any day it could happen to you, your time is up. It's the same thing to me and I'd rather cop it doing SOMETHING. See a bit of the world thrown in. You can die of boredom I bet.

*Your the best mum. Brilliant!! I know I havn't always been the best son. I want to make it up and be someone you can be proud of one day to call your son. Love you mum,
Mark*

P.S. If you see Jo say hi. I didn't write her a letter, will you tell her I'm useless at writing.

I turned off my phone though it was three days before they'd start looking for me. Dear Mark. Dear Mark. Dear Mark. I threw down the biro – couldn't get any further than that. I pulled up my sleeve to look at the bites, then brought it down again and began to scratch through the material – I didn't care – hard as I could, up and down, side to side, like rubbing sticks, until my arm was on fire.

As it got dark, the rain came in off the sea. The noise it made: I'd heard nothing like it since that summer before; it came in waves, handfuls of grit against the walls and the roof.

Bruce had been on Carlsberg for breakfast. 'Don't nag,' he'd said, before I said anything. 'We're on holiday.' He'd done his bit, he said. 'Off you go, Markie, why don't you go and see if you can find a mate?'

'He can't go out in this?' I said.

'Will you come?' Mark asked.

'They've table football in the Clubhouse,' Bruce said. 'Don't be a pussy, go on. Be a man.'

'Don't go off the campsite, will you Mark?' I said. 'Or with strangers? Come back for your dinner?'

'Go on,' Bruce said after him. 'Go on, mate.'

I'd watched him in his seaside shorts pick up speed and

THE CHALLENGE

run as fast as he could, dodging the rain like he was dodging bullets.

Day Seven. Writing it down takes up the time. With no telly, no radio, alone in a place that isn't your own, what else is there to do? I've been out once or twice for milk and biscuits. I've even tried the beach. But it's so flat and wide and empty – I don't need that.

10.30. A second missed appointment. They'll be ringing for me now, jumping up and down.

Day Eight. Safer indoors, except I'm afraid of the fire: the gas explodes with a bang when the pilot catches. So I've kept my coat on. Beginning to notice things going on *inside*: prickling in my wrists and fingers, throbbing under my arm and in my neck. If I lie back and shut my eyes there's a rainbow of colours like disco lights.

'All right, mouse?' Bruce says, pulling me backwards from the door.

'Do you think he'll be OK?' I say.

'Course! What's gonna happen? Come here. Stop fussing.'

He's got his arm around me from behind, pulling me in towards him.

'Why not?' he says.

'It's a goldfish bowl, that's why.'

'Not in the back, it's not. Come on mouse, do as you're told.'

'Let me clear up,' I say.

'We're on holiday,' he says again, hurting my wrist as he pulls me into the bedroom, 'in case you hadn't noticed.'

Day Nine. The sea. It's louder today. All through the night the breathing doesn't let up, as if there's someone under the caravan, waiting. It crosses my mind: it could be Bruce.

BIO-PUNK

Bruce?

'It's ten tomorrow,' she says, 'unless you've decided to stay on?' The lady at the office is at the crack in the door. She has to look up and round.

'I'm going to sweat it out,' I tell her. 'Sod's law. I'm OK, really. It's just the time of year.'

I hand her the cash through the gap and she folds it discreetly, without counting it. 'If you're sure,' she says, but she's not certain. 'You'll let me know if there's anything...'

'I'll be right as rain, I know it – in a day or two.'

Ten. There's people out there who let themselves be wrapped up – explosives hung on them like a life-jacket. What would make a person do that? Wires crossed, wire-snippers, a detonator either side: This is what it feels like.

Eleven: hotter every minute. I can hear them looking now, through the hatch, under the couch, the stairs, round the back of the shed. *Bruce will be back*, I tell them, *in no time, he'll come back*. But they're like the ugly sisters, you can't fob them off. I know exactly what they're after: slipper-shaped, pink, pulsing. They can't wait to get their hands on it. No knocking, no manners, as if they own the place.

There's another couple in the corner, been there since last night, rolling about on the floor, fighting, spawning – no difference. It's filthy, this place. I should have got out while I still had the chance, while I still had legs. There's sand chock-a-block in my throat. And the wailing. Like a siren. How long can a baby keep that up? *Pick him up*, I want to say, though the words won't come out. *Pick him up for God's sake*. Little mite, wailing his heart out, from where the sea breaks up, backs off.